

Gospel Verse
Sunday, December 28, 2008
(8:30 AM Mass)

"My eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepared in sight of all the peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel."

■ **Lk. 2:30-32**

Today is the Feast of the Holy Family. It is also known as 'Poke your family in the ribs Sunday'. Because this is the Sunday when, as Marie read the second reading from St. Paul today that everybody gets poked. As you get to the part where it says 'And children obey your parents', the parents go... Did you hear that?' And then the next line is, 'But, parents don't nag your children'. And the kids are going 'Ummmm' And then the husbands, you are to love your wives as you love your own body. And they poke. What really is the most problematic of all is this sumeterie. This sumeterie to your husband. In English it's translated to 'to submit' or 'to be subservient to' or 'subordinate to'. But, that's not the original meaning. As a matter of fact those who think of this in a fundamentalist way have done great damage to the family because if the man sees himself as Lord God and whatever he says is what it is... if he says 'jump' and they say 'how high', you can do a lot of damage to the family. That's not what it means at all.

Sumeterie means to 'stand under — to be a foundation of'. And there is nothing more foundational than family. And it is a mutual sumeterie. A husband sumeterie to his wife standing under foundational with her. A wife sumeterie to her husband, foundational with him because the family is foundational.

When all is said and done, for me personally in my own life and experience, and I'm sure for all of you in some way or another, family is the foundation. Family is everything. We are family. And to understand what family is about and how not just to preserve the family but to grow IN the family. And to use the family as a springboard into the fullness of life really is important for us.

And it's important for us to celebrate the family as it is, not in some kind of idealized form. But the difficulty with the Feast like the Holy Family is we've got Jesus, Joseph and Mary as the models of this ideal platonic family that, I'm sorry, doesn't exist in reality. It didn't even exist in Jesus' day. Somehow we got the idea that we knock at the door and Joseph opens the door and says, 'Come on in'. Mary and I have a baby and we're saying the rosary'. It wasn't that way.

As a matter of fact, we find the Holy Family sometimes as dysfunctional as our family. And when Jesus was 12 years old he decides to stick around in the temple while his parents are back on the road. For three days they are on the road because they are traveling in this huge, huge extended family caravan. If you want to get a little feel of what extended family was like, it's like Ann Rice has written some wonderful things about the early life of Jesus. Has done great research in what that extended family was like. And they were really protected. So, if you were caught in the caravan, you may be with cousins, aunts or uncles or nephews and nieces and you didn't worry about it. Three days later they are looking for him. They come back to the temple and there he is gabbing with the old guys. And Mary is fit to be tied. And she says, 'For three days we've been looking for you.' And what's His response? 'Lady, what's your problem?' A real adolescent. He's a real adolescent.

A child becomes an adolescent when they stop asking their parents where they came from and they start telling them where to go. He's doing that. He's driving her nuts. Not only is he driving her nuts then, but when he becomes a young man he's got his disciples around and he's teaching, his mother wants to get in. A Jewish mother can get whatever she wants. Not only today, but in those days especially. Any mother has a right...if the phone rings, and it's my mamma, I'm going to answer it. And Mary's knocking on the door and she wants to get in. They are saying 'Your mother's outside she wants to get in.' And Jesus says, 'Who is my mother?' 'Who is my brother?' 'Those who hear the Word of God...' Well, this has to be really painful.

What Jesus is doing is something incredible. He's not really slighting Mary so much as he's expanding the notion of family. Family now does not have to be blood. Family now only has to be an unconditional committed relationship that doesn't go away. Once you're family, you're family. You don't divorce your family. And that's a real difficult thing. We don't cut ourselves off. We may be out of relationship with our family. And most of us are. At one point in our lives... because at the very best, all families are dysfunctional.

At the very best, all families at some point fall apart. At the very best, all families need to be one thing constantly. And I tell this to young couples when they are about to enter into the second biggest thing to destroy marriages... of course the first biggest thing for young marriages is finances. The second biggest thing — in laws! And it's tough. And I tell them there's only one position you need to be in with your in laws, and that is in a continual position of reconciliation. And that means that no matter what you have to keep on working on the relationship.

Why? Because those are the relationships that were given to you by God. At some point every adolescent is convinced that God gave them the wrong parents. If they would have just had their neighbor's parents. They are so cool. They are so groovy. Well, they should be living with their buddy's parents. Because their buddies are saying the same thing about their parents. If I just had those.

We have exactly what we need. Whatever we need for salvation we're given. And that may be blood, or adopted or a neighbor. I realized, at a very young age that I needed grandparents. All my grandparents died before I was born. I had to go and find myself some grandparents. I didn't know I was doing it. But, I'm knocking on doors. I finally found a little old lady and man down the block. They became my grandparents. They were my grandparents. That's my family. That's real family.

Any committed relationship that doesn't go away is your family. And, of course, what God's great goal is for the whole cosmos, the whole world, the whole humankind to be come family. But, we can't relate to the whole cosmos or the whole world. So we begin small. We begin nuclear. We begin with the ones that he gives to us. And it doesn't have to be blood anymore. That's the wonderful thing.

When I was in Hopkins Park, the black mothers had a wonderful saying...I was raising a young man who became my son afterwards, Louis Home. And an old black matron loved Louis so much she said, "You know I couldn't love that boy more if I birthed him myself. It's not about blood, it's about love

I was sitting with my family the other day after the 6:30 mass on Christmas Day. Between that we had a little take-out dinner. And my blood brothers were with me and Butch was sitting at the table with us and I'm thinking... and my adopted son was sitting at the table and my adopted grandchildren were sitting at the table and I'm thinking, 'This is my family!' And we ain't going away. And we're really good at driving each other nuts. And that isn't going away either.

We should put up a sign over our doorway saying, 'Bless this Mess'. Families are messy. But, anybody whoever has given birth to a child realizes that you don't give birth without mess. It's always messy. It's never perfect. It never works the way we want it to. And it's an on-going adventure. Ongoing enterprise.

Two months ago my last living aunt died in Phoenix, Arizona. So my two blood brothers and I all flew down together. And it was hilarious. Because the moment they arrived at the rectory... It's something that the three of us could spend 3 or 4 days together at the same time. We weren't together 15 minutes and we were all 15, 16 and 18 years old again ready to kill each other. The old patterns were there. The old bribes were there and the old barbs were there. And we're still learning from each other. We had a marvelous time. It was a really wonderful experience to be with my blood brothers again. But I'll tell you, as soon as we all got back I said, 'You guys want to come in for a while?' And they said, 'No, we got to go!' They were in their cars and gone. But they will be back.

Let me tell you why they will be back? It's my family! And the school of life is the family. Especially siblings. I watched Keith and Steve today light the candles. Keith is showing Steve how to light the

candles without burning his Alb down. Not bad. That's family. We learn from each other. We bounce off of each other. The good and the bad.

I want to say something about family. All family, in some point come through crisis and danger of broken relationships. You can be out of communion with your family for a period of time but here's what you have to do — be radically open to the possibility of healing. And that's for parents, siblings, grandparents, cousins, what ever it is. If somebody has broken the relationship with you, all you can do is wait and pray. But, if you are the one who has broken the relationship, if you are the one who refuses to speak because somehow in 1949 they offended you and you haven't gotten over it yet, and every time you think about them you get really angry, Ma Bell wants to hear from you. Today's the Feast of the Holy Family. I might be a good day to make a telephone call.

They had a study as to what makes families really go. And in this study they discovered there was one thing that really, above everything else, was the most beneficial for a family. It wasn't intelligence of the parents or sophistication or teaching methods. It was the families that gathered around their dinner table every night for dinner no matter what. I know in our crazy suburban world, this culture is doing everything it can to separate families from each other. Don't you dare let it happen. At least once, twice or three times a week, no matter what it takes. My family in Colorado, he's a doctor and has the most ungodly hours but no matter how long it takes...and their kids are in their mid twenties all the way down to 12, they will wait until 7:00 or 8:00 at night so that they can sit down and eat as a family. Why? Because it's where everything happens. It's around that table.

It's not by mistake that Jesus did everything important He chose to do around the dinner table. Why? It's where we're fed. And we feed each other. It's where we learn. And where we teach. The table of fellowship was a big deal for Jesus. And in a Hebrew culture you did not get invited to table unless you were invited 'in'. Well, we're invited to the table. Why do you think I harp day in and day out for parents to make sure that they have the children here as a family to pray together. Not just because the family that prays together stays together, but the family that eats together grows together. This is not an option. This is where it happens. Because redemption always happens in the family.